

RISE 2008

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Subject: Biology, Heidelberg

I applied for RISE because it scared the heck out of me. Considering I had never been out of Canada before, never traveled alone, and spoke no German, it seemed like an enormous challenge. Now, having visited fourteen cities in four different countries while characterizing new oncogenes, I have come a long way! I feel like I finally have my own stories to tell and have become so much more capable and confident. I know myself better. This experience has really put little worries in perspective, allowing me to venture into a much wider realm of experiences. I have tried so many new things and learned about so many different aspects of history, culture, art, language, music and, of course, science. I feel so privileged for the opportunity. RISE provides an amazing balance of work experience and personal development – going from molecular biologist by weekday to European backpacker by weekend really makes life an adventure.

Germany at first felt like an alternate universe, there was such a juxtaposition of the familiar and totally unfamiliar at every level. Many of the TV shows are the same as in Canada but translated into German, there are McDonalds mixed with Bratwurst carts, and buildings hundreds of years old next to state-of-the-art research facilities. I felt like Harry Potter leaving the world of muggles to go to Hogwarts.

My typical day was shifted about two hours later than it would be at home - including working hours, meals and bed time! Days at work were often long, nine to six o'clock, but felt really fulfilling and even short in comparison to the days worked by many others in my lab. Most nights I would be going for dinner with other RISE students or people from the lab, watching movies together or wandering around the old town. The people I've met have made my experience

particularly international – I found myself, a Canadian, eating Thai food in Germany with a Romanian, a Serbian, a Russian and an American! There are people in my lab from Turkey, Spain, France and Ukraine. I particularly envy how multilingual many Europeans are; I had no problems not being able to speak German, though now I really want to learn it! The two or three nights a week I actually had at home were used packing or unpacking, doing laundry, getting groceries, trip planning and getting some sleep!

I am particularly impressed by German research. The lab I worked in seemed decades ahead of Canadian labs I have worked in. I felt like my lab could obtain and process data on a huge scale and have an enormous output of research findings. It seems like the whole genome is at our fingertips! I was also impressed by how thoroughly research was done before people here would trust the data. My lab in Germany was also much larger than other labs I've been in, having more than twenty researchers. I really enjoyed learning about all their different uses of similar techniques. Moreover, the enthusiasm and expertise they had for their work was inspiring. Lab meetings often reminded me of scenes out of Star Trek, with the crew conspiring to solve some mysterious problem. Discussing projects with other RISE students was also fascinating, and made me aware of many other areas of research I would be interested in. I feel like I've been skyrocketed into the real, big, happening, world of research.

I also noticed safety regulations are also stricter in Germany. Never before have I had safety inspections of labs, a security guard at the front desk, so many different types of waste buckets, or so many forms to get signed when leaving. The effectiveness of all this at keeping researchers safe would probably pale in comparison to the impact of just getting air conditioning, so that researchers could wear lab coats without dying of heat exhaustion! When it was just too hot I would read journals in the room with the fruit flies, ironically the only air conditioned place.

Overall, I have had a life changing eight weeks. I've been inspired to explore my surroundings wherever I may be. The world feels so much more accessible. Thank you RISE!